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ABSTRACT

As a national support organization for parents of twins and higher order multiples, the National Organization of Mothers of Twins Clubs, Inc. (NOMOTC) has as its purpose the education of parents, teachers and other individuals having direct responsibility and interest in the special aspects of child development which relate to multiple birth children. This paper presents guidelines prepared by NOMOTC which will enable educators and school support staffs to understand the special social and psychological factors affecting multiple birth children and their families. The guidelines cover areas of classroom environment, child placement, instructional consistency, child exceptionality, and staff development. The guidelines are intended for use at all levels of education and provide a broad framework within which educators may begin to discuss this topic. (JPB)

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Guidelines for the Education of Multiple Birth Children

Prepared by the National Organization of Mothers of Twins Clubs, Inc.

Introduction

In the United States the incidence of multiple births is approximately 1 in 43 for twins and 1 in 1,341 for triplets and higher order multiples. Over 90,000 twins and 4,000 triplets and higher order multiples are born each year. While the vast majority of multiple births continue to be twins, a recent study showed that higher order births rose by 7% between 1992 and 1993. New fertility drugs and assisted repro-ductive techniques make it likely that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future.

Statement of Purpose

As a national support organization for parents of twins and higher order multiples, the National Organization of Mothers of Twins Clubs, Inc. (NOMOTC) has as its purpose the education of parents, teachers and other individuals having direct responsibility and interest in the special aspects of child development which relate to multiple birth children. This paper is intended as a set of general guidelines which will enable educators and school support staffs to become better acquainted with the special social and psychological considerations affecting multiple birth children and their families.

The general guidelines which follow are intended for use at all levels of education and provide a broad framework within which educators may begin to dialogue on this topic. Further resources will be listed at the end of the paper.

Basic Principles

Due to the ever-increasing number of multiple births in the U.S., and due to the special social and psychological considerations involving multiple birth children, educators and educational training institutions should consider the following:

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1. Schools should provide an atmosphere which respects the close nature of the multiple bond while at the same time encouraging individual abilities. A basic knowledge of the psychology of multiple birth children, especially as it differs between identicals and fraternals, is essential. An awareness of the depth of bonding between identical siblings and some same-sex fraternals will promote greater sensitivity to the needs of these children. An understanding that each multiple birth child is unique (even when the child is part of an identical set) will prompt the school staff to recognize and encourage each child's abilities. Educators should learn to recognize each child in a set of multiples individually without resorting to extraordinary means such as requiring identical twins to wear name tags, different color clothes or different hair styles. The children should be called correctly by their own names and not simply referred to as "the twins." The classroom teacher should be able to recognize each child's particular academic strengths and weaknesses. No overt comparisons should be made between siblings in a multiple set.

2. Schools should maintain a flexible placement policy throughout the early elementary school years. Consultation with parents and the involved children will provide clearer insights into how the children's needs can best be served. Placement decisions should not be made for the purpose of promoting the children's individuality or for the teachers' convenience and ease of name/face recognition. Successful placement involves a collaborative decision which allows for ease of separation from the parent and the other multiple as well as for successful social and academic growth. These decisions should be reviewed annually to see if they are accomplishing the desired purpose.

3. When multiple birth children are enrolled in different classrooms at the same grade level there is a need for a consistent approach to instruction and classroom management. Teachers at the same grade level need to coordinate their efforts when a set of multiples is split between their classrooms. Primary-age multiples often experience disappointment, confusion, anger and other negative emotions about their school experiences. These are often the result of teacher-directed activities in one classroom which may be lacking in another. Jealousy and anger may be directed toward the sibling who is perceived to have the "better classroom." Multiples who are separated in same grade classrooms can become a catalyst for improving team-teaching techniques and inspiring a more evenly balanced program of instruction. While this problem may lessen by the middle school years, teachers and administrators still need to recognize the very real problems which placement in separate classrooms can cause for multiple birth students.

4. Educators should move with extreme caution when considering retention, acceleration, or designation in any one of the areas of exceptionality of one or more children in a set of multiples. Psychological and social considerations involving the nature of the multiple bond must receive equal weight with academic considerations. The effects of school retention, acceleration, or designation in any area of exceptionality are much greater on a multiple birth child since they may alter the sibling relationship in a profound manner. These effects can range from mild loss of self-esteem and confusion over the status of the siblings in the multiple-birth grouping to a deeper sense of loss of identity with the co-multiple(s) and feelings of anger and rejection. On the other hand, there is a definite need to separate the multiple birth issue from the issue of what is best for the individual child. As a result, the question of retention, acceleration, or designation in an area of exceptionality of a multiple birth child is highly complicated and needs to be approached with full consideration of all the possible benefits and harm which may result from the decision. Teachers need to be sensitive to the feelings and actions of all co-multiples and alert to possible problems for all of the children. If retention or acceleration is unavoidable, counseling services should be made available to all of the affected multiples.

5. Teachers at the primary, middle and high school levels should value parental input regarding the nature of the multiples' relationship. Classroom observations, particularly if the multiples are in separate classrooms, will not provide educators with enough knowledge to make informed decisions which may affect the children's social or psychological well-being. Usually, parents can provide information into the dynamics at work within the children's relationship at any given point in their development. At the primary level teachers need to become aware of the level of dependency between the co-multiples and respond in a manner which makes each child comfortable. Adolescent multiples may be having difficulty with their relationship as each strives to establish an independent identity. Identical and fraternal relationships will differ, as will relationships between same sex and different sex fraternals. Parents can offer insights which will enable the educator to respond in a more effective manner to the needs of the children.

6. School districts should provide staff at all grade levels with multiple-related research and reading materials. Educators should seek out the latest research findings regarding the psychology of multiple birth children and incorporate these findings into their pedagogy. Reading materials regarding multiple birth children should be available in all faculty libraries. Inservice programs related to this topic would benefit the instruction of multiple birth children. Parents of older multiple birth children should be contacted as resource persons. Teachers who are aware of the literature and the issues affecting multiple birth children are another welcome source of support for multiple birth families and may become the vital link between these families and available support groups and programs.

7. At the university level, schools of education should include research findings into the psychology of twins and higher order multiples in their curricula. Attention should be paid to preparing teachers who are informed and sensitive to the needs of an increasing population of multiple birth children.

Conclusions

The needs of an increasing population of multiple birth children should be considered at all levels of educational instruction. School policies, decisions and instruction which are based on a sound understanding of the psychology and social development of multiples will enable these children to move through the school years more happily and successfully. Any assumption that twins and higher order multiples have the same needs as singleton children can be damaging and counterproductive to the purpose of the educational institution. Appropriate research and literature exists which can provide a basis for a sensitive, knowledge-based approach to the education of multiple birth children. Parents and experts in the field should be considered valued resources for assisting school administrators and faculties with decisions affecting multiples.

GLOSSARY

co-twin or co-multiple -- one child of a multiple birth set

fraternal -- dizygotic, or two egg twins resulting from the separate fertilization of two ova; fraternal siblings have their own unique genes and may be same sex or different sex.

higher order multiples -- a multiple birth set consisting of three or more children (triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets, etc.)

identical -- monozygotic, or one egg twins who share all their genes in common; they are always the same sex, have identical features, eye and hair color.

mirror image twins -- monozygotic twins with identical features displayed on opposite sides of the body; left handed identicals are often mirror image co-twins.

multiple birth children -- a group of two (twins) or more (higher order) children who typically are conceived at the same time of the same parents, are born at the same time, and share a certain biological and genetic make-up.

singleton -- a child who is not part of a multiple birth set.

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